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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DAS KAIDANOW URGES DEMOCRATIC REFORM IN GEORGIA

REF: TBILISI 1739

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires a.i. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During meetings with a wide range of GoG officials, non-parliamentary opposition leaders, opposition and majority MPs, and members of civil society, EUR DAS Tina Kaidanow stressed to all of her interlocutors the importance of political engagement and the need for progress on democratic reforms. She stressed the link between democratic reform and Georgia's security, noting that developing a stable democracy was Georgia's best option to make progress in the Euro-Atlantic context and re integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Her Georgian government counterparts said that they remained committed to democratic reform, transparency, the peaceful reintegration of the separatist territories and cooperation with NATO. Non-parliamentary opposition and civil society counterparts expressed a commitment to work within the system for change; only Nino Burjanadze argued that the government's commitment to reform and dialogue could not be trusted. In discussions with Ministers of Internal Affairs and Defense, DAS Kaidanow urged transparency and continued reform, and at MOIA, asked for more progress in the investigations regarding arrests made during the spring 2009 protests. DAS Kaidanow's meeting with President Saakashvili is reported septel. End Summary.

DEMOCRACY DISCUSSIONS WITH SPEAKER, MPS AND MINISTER SHASHKIN

¶2. (C) In multiple September 14-15 meetings with GoG parliamentarians and ministers, DAS Kaidanow stressed the importance of continued democratic reforms, underscoring that Georgia's future relies on continued democratic momentum. After a breakfast meeting with American Chamber of Commerce members, DAS Kaidanow pointed out to her government interlocutors that business representatives had expressed repeated concern to her over the rule of law in the country and continuing domestic political instability. In their words, political influence on the judiciary and an uncertain reform environment were bigger impediments to new foreign investment than the August 2008 war and the continued Russian presence in the country. Minister for Corrections and Legal Assistance Dima Shashkin acknowledged that the judicial system was the weakest aspect of Georgia's democratic government. (Embassy Note: Shashkin is the GoG's intergovernmental coordinator for democratic reform in addition to his ministerial portfolio. End Note.) Shashkin said that in an effort to clean up the court system, many new judges had been appointed, and many of them were still learning to be comfortable with their own authority and autonomy. Shashkin believed that after the spring protests that the time was ripe for political dialogue, and that Georgia could not afford to miss the opportunity for reform.

¶3. (C) Parliamentary Speaker David Bakradze pointed out in his discussion with DAS Kaidanow the challenge to reform when the opposition does not participate in a range of fora.

Bakradze felt that the non-parliamentary opposition's constant attacks and lack of involvement served to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. Bakradze cited the example of the Electoral Legislation Working Group as a venue that the non-parliamentary opposition criticized, but also refused to participate in. Bakradze reiterated the GoG's commitment to working with both parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition, and said the GoG wanted to move Qnon-parliamentary opposition, and said the GoG wanted to move politics off the streets and show the public that the place for political debate and democratic development was inside parliament.

¶4. (C) Both Bakradze and Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Akaki Minashvili maintained that all political parties were united in their foreign policy outlook and the importance of remaining united in the face of the Russian threat. In that regard, Minashvili emphasized that the best way to achieve territorial integrity and stability was through economic development. He stressed the importance of having a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. and noted that at a minimum, even an ongoing negotiating process would provided meaningful economic benefits to Georgia. Minashvili also stressed the importance of U.S. military training and equipment. DAS Kaidanow agreed that a focus on economic development was important, but reiterated that the best way to bolster support for Georgia was fr the GOG to put its best face forward in terms of democratic reforms. DAS Kaidanow also stressed the importance of working with the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in any way possible in order to maintain ties, without which future integration would not be possible.

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OPPOSITION TALKS - APPEARS ALSO TO LISTEN

¶5. (C) With members of the non-parliamentary opposition, DAS Kaidanow emphasized the importance and the benefits of participation within the political framework. Non-parliamentary opposition leader Irakli Alasania (Our Georgia - Free Democrats) confirmed that he was of the same opinion and said that his party and his larger Alliance for Georgia (including Republicans and New Rights) had decided to join the electoral code working group. Alasania declared his intention to aggressively campaign in the local elections scheduled for May 2010. Alasania stressed the necessity of developing a solid platform and working in coalitions, including with the parliamentary opposition Christian Democratic Movement, in order to create a strong opposition alternative to the ruling United National Movement party. Alasania said, however, that party development was difficult in this "tremendously hostile fundraising environment." He noted that businesses would like to donate to his party, but they fear retribution by the tax authorities. Alasania declared that his party was "not going back to the streets." He felt that the fact that the spring protests ended peacefully was a sign that the country had matured and the time was right for engagement.

¶6. (C) In contrast, non-parliamentary opposition leader Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement United Georgia) said that she has not made any decision on her participation in the May 2010 local elections, arguing that local elections were irrelevant in any case because local governments had no real power. Burjanadze declared that her participation in formal political institutions would be dependent on certain concrete steps by the GOG to normalize the political environment, including the investigation into the alleged beatings of opposition activists, and the return of the ownership of the disputed Imedi television channel to the Patarkatsishvili family. Burjanadze urged that any international financial assistance to the GOG be conditioned on reaching democratic benchmarks.

¶7. (C) Parliamentary opposition leader Giorgi Targamadze

(Christian Democratic Movement) similarly suggested that aid should be targeted at democratic reform. Targamadze told DAS Kaidanow that GoG had a window of opportunity to make a number of necessary democratic changes before the elections in May 2010. He noted that his party's platform would focus on strengthening Parliament and decentralizing the structure of the government to allow more autonomy on the local level. He felt that it was important for the opposition to have successes in May in places like Tbilisi and Batumi, and to that end he was "always ready to work with those who have concrete principals." Targamadze mentioned his growing relationship with Alasania and opportunities among the larger opposition to coalesce around specific issues to pressure the GoG to reform. DAS Kaidanow agreed that a unified opposition could be a powerful democratic alternative in the next elections and encouraged cooperation among the opposition where practical.

FOREIGN MINISTER: WE NEED SOME SUPPORT

¶8. (C) Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze expressed concern that several other countries including Belarus might follow Venezuela's lead in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He asked whether the United States might push back on those countries, wondering if some price could be placed on a country's decision to recognize; Kaidanow said that the United States would do what it could, including making clear public statements about its position, but did not always have significant leverage over the countries likely to consider recognition. Vashadze also suggested that, if Belarus recognized the regions, he would expect the EU to "choose Georgia over Belarus"; if it did not, he said Georgia would then have to reconsider its involvement in the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative (reftel). Kaidanow urged caution, saying that there was no guarantee that the EU would act in the way Vashadze was anticipating, and that it would be counterproductive for Georgia to withdraw from an important opportunity to engage with the EU.

¶9. (C) Vashadze asked for a clear USG statement on NATO accession, including on the question of whether a MAP was a necessary step in the process, which even countries in the Balkans were on the verge of receiving. He argued that U.S. silence would itself send a strong message to Russia that the United States was backing away from its commitment to support Georgia's NATO accession. Kaidanow noted that the context of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations was quite different than that of Montenegro, and said that Georgia needed to have a realistic assessment of its path towards NATO, utilizing

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cooperative efforts like the deployment of Georgian troops to Afghanistan, for which she thanked the Georgian government. Vashadze recognized the wide range of important issues currently facing the United States, but urged DAS Kaidanow not to expect much help from Russia on Iran, telling Kaidanow to "repeat as a mantra: Russia has no influence on Iran."

¶10. (C) Vashadze said that a phone call from President Obama to President Saakashvili, even for five minutes, would send a very helpful message reflecting continued U.S. support for Georgia. He asked about the schedule for U.S.-Georgia Charter consultations. Both he and Kaidanow agreed on the need for four working groups to focus on specific issues. Vashadze requested that the structure of the consultations be formalized, because a robust format would convey a strong U.S.-Georgia relationship and send a useful signal to Russia. He added that he was ready at any time to travel to Washington to conduct meetings with Assistant Secretary Gordon. (Embassy note: a meeting at the UNGA was subsequently arranged. End note) The Foreign Minister reported that Georgia was facing serious financial difficulties and would likely seek additional assistance from the United States, possibly as much as USD 300 million, to help with such areas as the budget deficit and housing for

IDPs. Kaidanow responded that assistance at that level would be difficult in the current budget environment, but the Charge noted that USD 50 million of the recent supplemental assistance was likely to go toward IDP housing and other items that might help offset Georgian budgetary requirements.

¶11. (C) Kaidanow also noted the USG's appreciation that Georgia had refrained from filing a brief in the Kosovo case before the ICJ, and in general for supporting many other U.S. goals. She emphasized, however, U.S. concern over Georgia's seizures of ships in the Black Sea, which was of concern for legal reasons but even more problematic due to the potentially destabilizing effect on the security situation. Vashadze said that Georgia would be discussing the issue and looking for a peaceful solution with Turkey; he noted that ships could stop in undisputed Georgian ports and receive permission to continue on to Abkhazia. He also asserted that no more ships would be stopped for some time. The Foreign Minister also expressed his appreciation for U.S. efforts to support the UNGA resolution on Georgian IDPs, recognizing Stephen Gee and Ambassador DiCarlo by name for their expertise and contribution.

REINTEGRATION MINISTER: THINKING STRATEGY

¶12. (C) Reintegration Minister Temuri Yakobashvili told Kaidanow about his ministry's efforts to develop a strategy on the occupied territories. (Embassy note: USAID is providing technical assistance to this effort. End note) He said he hoped to draw on the experience of other countries with disputed territories to assemble a long-term plan to lay the groundwork for the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to re-establish connections with the rest of Georgia. Kaidanow indicated a willingness to assist, both in the development of the strategy and in the implementation. Yakobashvili hoped to complete a draft of the strategy by November, circulate it to various stakeholders for comment, then finalize it by the end of the year, in order to be ready to implement as soon as the December "presidential" elections in Abkhazia are over. He agreed with Kaidanow that there is no military solution to the situation, and gradual engagement was therefore the only way forward. Yakobashvili suggested that the de facto authorities ultimately could be convinced to return to the fold, but he was not sure that Russia could be convinced to allow it; it would depend on Russia's internal dynamics. He was less sanguine about interaction with the South Ossetian population than with the Abkhaz, because he said the population of South Ossetia is down to 12,000, most of whom work for the Russians.

¶13. (C) Yakobashvili maintained that one area with great potential for re-establishing links was trade; he said one idea was to build a food storage facility close to the South Ossetian administrative boundary. He suggested setting up regular transportation links, such a bus line, between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. Another area for potential interaction was health care; Yakobashvili said Georgia already quietly provided care to Abkhaz residents, both by sending doctors to Abkhazia and accepting patients in undisputed Georgia, especially with such expensive-to-treat conditions as AIDS, Hepatitis C, and tuberculosis. He noted that some patients travel from Sochi, Russia to Tbilisi for treatment. Asked about the possibility of confidence-building conversations between civil society representative from Tbilisi and the separatist regions, Yakobashvili did not object to the idea, but advocated

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bringing together low-profile members of society instead-- suggesting members of real communities and former neighbors, who will be able to see the value of re-establishing connections without political overtones. Kaidanow advised that, as the Georgians develop their strategy, they should adopt as flexible an approach as possible on such details as travel documents, in order to enable a wide range of programs

to succeed.

MOD AND MOIA: KAIDANOW URGES REFORM AND RESTRAINT

¶14. (C) In the embassy's first bilateral meeting with new Minister of Defense Bacho Akhalaia, DAS Kaidanow noted the concern that Western governments and the USG had expressed at his appointment, and urged his continued focus on reform an issues related to Euro-Atlantic progress. Akhalaia welcomed the chance to meet with Kaidanow and stated his plan to continue the reform efforts of his predecessor. He said that he planned no major changes at MOD.

¶15. (C) Minister of Internal Affairs Merabishvili told DAS Kaidanow that the MOIA was largely focused on providing security on the administrative boundary lines (ABL) with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In response to a question about Georgia's assessment of the role of the EUMM, Head of the MOIA Analytical Department Shota Utashvili described the EUMM as playing an important role which has reduced tensions over the last six months. Utashvili described them as the "eyes and ears" of the international community. Kaidanow noted that all her Georgian interlocutors had agreed that there was no military solution to Georgia's current challenges, and she emphasized to the minister that stability was needed in order for Georgia to extend a hand to the people on the other sides of the ABLs. Utashvili said that Georgia was powerless to help Georgians on the other side of the Enguri River and expressed frustration with Russian recalcitrance to discuss easing border crossings. DAS Kaidanow underscored again that the ship seizures by Georgia's Coast Guard (under the authority of the MOIA) were potentially destabilizing, and she also urged transparency from the MOIA in dealing with incidents resulting from the spring 2009 protests and encouraged the MOIA's continued dialogue with members of the opposition.

¶16. (U) DAS Kaidanow has cleared this message.

LOGSDON